DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 314 002 HE 023 113

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TITLE The Role of the College Institutional Research Office.
INSTITUTION United Negro College Fund, Inc., New York, N.Y.
PUB DATE Nov 89
NOTE 7p.; Revision of paper originally presented at the meeting of the Georgia Association of Collegiate Registrars and Admissions Officers (July 31, 1989).
AVAILABLE FROM United Negro College Fund, Inc., 500 East 62nd St., New York, NY 10021.
PUB TYPE Reports - Research/Technical (143) -- Speeches/Conference Papers (150)
JOURNAL CIT Research Report; v13 n1 Nov 1989

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Academic Persistence; Cooperation; Credits; Evaluation Methods; Higher Education; *Institutional Research; Knowledge Level; *Outcomes of Education; Public Colleges; Research Needs; Socioeconomic Influences; *Student Characteristics; Student Employment; Student Evaluation

ABSTRACT

The paper reviews findings, many of them unexpected, of college institutional research offices and other educational researchers listed under the following headings: the working student, the academic load, economic background, cooperation, cultural literacy, retention, and outcomes assessment. Noted findings include: the student who holds a part-time job generally outperforms the student who does not work; the greater the number of academic hours carried by full time students the better the academic performance; although there is a strong relationship between total family income and student performance on the Scholastic Aptitude Test, students from very well-to-do families tend to perform poorly; cooperative study may be more effective than individual study; basic cultural literacy appears lacking in college freshmen; although only 27% of entering freshmen at public universities have graduated after 4 years, 60% of these students have either graduated or are still enrolled. Institutional researchers are encouraged to develop means of measuring more important student outcomes such as the development of humane values and problem-solving skills. (DB)

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Research Report

Volume XIII, Number 1, November 1989 FROM THE UNITED NEGRO COLLEGE FUND

THE ROLE OF THE COLLEGE INSTITUTIONAL RESEARCH OFFICE

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by
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(The following paper is an edited revision of remarks presented at the meeting of the Georgia Association of Collegiate Registrars and admissions Officers, July 31, 1989)

The college institutional research office is a relatively new office on the college scene. Unlike the office of the registrar, which has long been a fixture at almost every college, the institutional research office first appeared at many American colleges in the 1960's when colleges were faced with huge increases in applications for enrollment. Since the circumstances demanded a shift from an open admissions policy to one which required some selectivity, these colleges were keenly interested in looking at ways to predict which applicants would most likely be successful if admitted. Institutional research study at most colleges began as an adjunct of the admissions office and was clearly designed to help the admissions officer make the best possible selection of applicants. The typical study looked at the correlation between Scholastic Aptitude Test scores (verbal and/or mathematical) and the high school academic record with course grades in college (usually only first-year grades). Warren Willingham (in his 1985 book Success in College) cites Leonard Ramist's work which summarizes the median correlations between the various predictors and college first-year grades. See Table 1.

Table 1. Median Correlations with Freshman Grades

Predictor	Median Correlation
SAT-verbal score.	.36
SAT-mathematical score.	.35
High school record.	.48
SAT-verbal and mathematical scores and HS record.	.55

Jacqueline Fleming has looked at a number of such studies completed at black colleges and has concluded that standardized test scores predict

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Over the past 25 years, college institutional research offices have greatly expanded their range of inquiry. I would like to share with you some of the more interesting findings generated by college institutional research offices and by other educational researchers. In many cases you will see the crucial supporting role played by registrars and admissions office personnel in producing useful institutional research reports. Some of the findings may surprise you since they may be somewhat counter to our commonsense notions as to how students "ought" to perform and/or act. However, one of the exciting things about institutional research for me is to help discover what is really true, rather than to assume that I already know what is true. Over the years I have learned that some of the things that I thought I "knew about college students were sometimes only partially true and sometimes were not true at all.

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1. The Working Student. Consistent findings over many years have confirmed that the student who holds a part-time job while enrolled in college generally out-performs the student who does not work at all. However, the research also clearly shows that the student who works full-time while attempting to pursue a full-time schedule of college courses is generally unable to do an adequate job--either at work or at college.

Now how can we make use of this consistent research finding to benefit students? Too often institutional research officers have been content to merely report this finding in a report such as I am giving you now. But to be effective in improving the learning outcomes of our students, this research knowledge should at least impel us to find out who of our students are working and how many hours they are working; we should then communicate this information to advisors, to the staff of the counseling center, and to others who know and work with the student.

We also should talk with the financial aid office to see that the college's aid funds are being used most advantageously in aiding financially needy students. No full-time student should have to work full-time in order to attend college. Also, our financial aid policies should stipulate that aid funds are first and foremost directed to financially needy students. I also believe that the eligibility standards for receiving financial aid should be identical with the college's standards for continued academic "good standing." A financially needy student who is faced with severe academic problems should not be forced to work a full-time job.

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2. The Academic Load. One of the most widely used prescriptions for dealing with students in academic difficulty is to suggest a reduction in academic load for the student who has suffered poor grades. Institutional research I completed while at Morehouse casts considerable doubt on the wisdom of using this approach as an antidote to poor scholarship. I looked at full-time students from three ability levels--high, average, and low--who took various course loads. I found a consistent relationship for all three groups of students--the greater the number of hours carried, the better the academic performance. This finding was true for the low-ability students as well as for the average and high-ability students.

I suggest that this finding, along with the finding about part-time work, tends to confirm what many of us have frequently observed about effective people. Effective, productive persons--whether they be students, registrars, admissions officers, or institutional researchers--make good use of their time. They manage their time effectively. Simply enforcing a policy that gives a poorly performing student more time is not adequate counseling; we need to help such students make better use of the time they have. Without help in the matter of effective use of time, giving poorly performing students more free time is simply giving them more time to waste. During the freshman orientation program and perhaps at other times throughout the year, the staff of the counseling center should offer time-management seminars to students and faculty and staff.

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3. Economic Background. The College Board has published a number of yearly profiles of students taking the Scholastic Aptitude Test. These profiles show a consistent strong relationship between the total family income and the student's performance on the test. However, some research which I have done on this topic calls into question whether family income is positively correlated with performance in college through all income ranges. Some of my data suggest that students from very well-to-do families tend to

perform as poorly in college as students from poverty back-grounds. The reasons for their poor performance are, however, quite different. The student from the poor family often simply does not have access to an educationally enhancing environment, while the student from the very rich family may have learned that he does not need to work since his family will insure his continued welfare.

This is an area that needs considerable more investigation. Perhaps my finding was peculiar to my institution. But if others also find that students from well-to-do families do experience academic difficulties in college, then we must adjust our thinking to a different kind of "disadvantage" prevalent on our campuses.

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4. Cooperation. One of the most exciting pieces of institutional research was completed about two years ago at the University of California, Berkeley. This pioneer educational research was completed--not by an institutional researcher or a psychologist--but by a mathematician, Uri Treisman. Treisman observed that Asian-American students were performing much better in his calculus classes than were black students. He checked the usual predictors of student success--math aptitude scores, the reported time spent in studying, and various measures of the students' success orientation--and found that there were no significant differences between the groups. By some stroke of genius, Treisman decided to observe the two groups in greater detail during their out-of-class hours. He employed graduate students to actually follow the students with video cameras at the library, in the dining halls, and in their dormitories. He was principally interested in recording how much time the students actually spent in studying. What he found out was quite interesting: the black students and the Asian-American students were spending about the same amount of time in studying calculus, but the way in which they were studying was fundamentally different. The black students tended to study individually while the Asian-American students studied together in small groups. The Asian-American students used the same group study technique that many of us have used as graduate students in preparing for our prelims. Studying together in small groups allows students to be absolutely honest with one another, to anticipate questions the instructor might ask, and to prepare questions which can be posed to the instructor. Most of all, the small groups gave the Asian-American students a feeling of group support which the black students simply did not have. After completion of his study, Treisman used his findings to institute a structured group learning session for the black students; the students now meet twice a week for a two-hour session during which time they carry out the same kind of student cross-examinations that were such an important part of the Asian-Americans' study process. Also, Treisman reports that the black students are now performing equally well in the calculus course.

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5. Cultural Literacy. Another important bit of educational research is largely the work of E. D. Hirsch, an English professor at the University of Virginia. He and his colleagues have identified over 5,000 names, phrases, dates, and concepts which they feel every American should know by the time of high school graduation. Hirsch, in describing the importance of the concept, quotes another Virginian, Thomas Jefferson:

> Were it left to me to decide whether we should have a government without newspapers, or newspapers without a government, I should not hesitate a moment to prefer the latter. But I should mean that every man should receive those papers and be capable of reading them.

Hirsch notes that "The civic importance of cultural literacy lies in the fact that true enfranchisement depends upon knowledge, knowledge upon literacy, and literacy upon cultural literacy." Apparently vast numbers of Americans do not possess an adequate level of cultural literacy. The National Assessment of Education Progress has revealed, for example, that two-thirds of the 17-year olds in the United States could not place the Civil War within the period 1850-1900 and that half could not identify Winston Churchill or Stalin.

Hirsch's work is important because it sets forth the basic concepts which college teachers assume all American students should know by the time they enter our institutions. As a follow-up to Hirsch, we should devise instruments to assess the proportion of the cultural literacy domain known by our incoming students. If large numbers are

deficient in a number of areas, we should offer remedial instruction so that all our students will quickly learn what they were supposed to have learned in high school.

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6. Retention. A recent article by Alexander Astin, William Korn, and Kenneth Green gives much valuable information about retention rates at various types of American colleges. The authors, who are associated with the Cooperative Institutional Research Program at UCLA, used data which was supplied through the cooperation of college registrars and college institutional research officers. Shown below are the percentages of students who were graduated in four years at different kinds of institutions.

Table 2. Percentage of Entering Freshmen Graduating in Four Years At:

Private Universities	56
Non-Sectarian Four-Year Colleges	47
Catholic Four-Year Colleges	43
Protestant Four-Year Colleges	41
Public Universities	27
Public Four-Year Colleges	20

Astin and his co-authors show that if other definitions of persistence are used, the figures look much better. For example, some 60 percent of entering students at public universities were either graduated or were enrolled for a fifth year.

The authors also noted the high relationship between the high graduation rates at the private colleges and their high level of student selectivity. Some 48 percent of those students who reported an "A-" average in high school earned a bachelor's degree in four years; in comparison, only 22 percent of those reporting a "B-" average earned a degree in that time. The importance of high Scholastic Aptitude Test (SAT) scores was also shown. About half of those entering freshmen who had total (verbal + math) scores of 1200 or higher were graduated in four years, as compared to only one-quarter of those with total scores of 800 or less.

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7. Outcomes Assessment. I have been discussing areas of educational research which are generally familiar to registrars, admissions officers, and institutional researchers. These more traditional areas are ones in which there has been considerable cooperation and mutual support in obtaining the raw data and getting the research findings to persons on our campuses who can make or influence decisions. I would next like to turn to an area which is becoming increasingly more important--outcomes assessment. As you know, the accrediting associations are demanding that colleges give far more attention to planning and to outcomes assessment. In discussing outcomes assessment in a recent article in the AGB Reports, Charles Claxton, Patricia Murrell, and Martha Porter "suggest that institutions will be called upon to assess outcomes at four levels: (1) cognitive skill in content areas, (2) higher level skills which call for an integration of cognitive and affective functioning, (3) work and life competencies, and (4) complexity of thinking and degree of self-directedness."

It seems to me that many of us in institutional research positions (and perhaps even some registrars) have been guilty of measuring that which was easy to measure rather than that which was important. We have not been guided by our statements of purpose as much as by the easy availability of GPA's and scholastic aptitude test scores. In examining a number of collegiate statements of purpose, typical goals that are frequently listed include:

* to develop a humane sense of values
* to develop and enhance problem-solving skills
* to develop and promote better interpersonal relations
* to develop good work habits--dependability, responsibility, loyalty, integrity, etc.
* to help students develop independence and self-direction
* to develop appreciation of and sensitivity to human differences

Measuring, keeping good records, and reporting about such legitimate goals will not be easy. The newer measures that we will be forced to use will not be as neat or as simple as the ones we have been used to; they may even be more expensive in terms of administration and perhaps more ambiguous. Certainly, they will be more challenging and, hopefully, more helpful to our students.

In the future we must develop a wide range of assessment procedures geared to a wide range of competencies. In the coming years much effort will be required from all of us to develop measures which reflect the real purposes of our institutions. All of us who share responsibility for the welfare of our colleges--and the students they serve--must be prepared to measure all outcomes which we have pledged to develop in our students. Such an undertaking will require the full cooperation of registrars, admissions officers, and institutional researchers. None of us can act alone.

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The Research Report is published by the Research Department of the United Negro College Fund, a consortium of forty-one private black colleges and universities. For information contact the Research Department, United Negro College Fund, Inc., 500 East 62nd Street, New York, New York 10021 -- (212) 326-1243.

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